

A Brief Treatise on Humor

Eleven Axioms

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written with an AI, about something AI
will never fully understand.

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Eleven Axioms

I. Humor is effective or it is not.

II. Humor does not explain. It performs.

III. The joke is to humor what the part is to the whole.

IV. Humor is placing something where it does not belong.

V. Humor that needs to be explained is no longer humor.

VI. Humor is intellectual surprise.

VII. Humor is tragedy plus time.

VIII. Humor ages when it depends on reference. It does not age when it depends on tension.

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XI. Every attempt to define humor falls into its own trap.

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Preface

In a scene from *The Gold Rush*, Buster Keaton —no, Chaplin— eats a shoe. He does so with the concentration and protocol of someone dining at the finest restaurant in the world. The laces as noodles. The sole as steak. The nail as a bone to be sucked with delicacy. The universe has reduced him to eating leather and he ignores this completely, or he knows it and doesn't care, which amounts to the same thing but is considerably funnier.

Nobody in that scene says it is funny. Nobody explains it. It happens and moves on.

Daniel Rabinovich, on the other hand, attempts to introduce a musical piece with all the academic seriousness in the world. He has a folder. He has notes. He has vocabulary. What he does not have is control over language, which rebels in real time, betraying him with a precision no script could have planned. Rabinovich does not make humor. He suffers it. The object takes revenge on the method before the audience.

That too happens and moves on.

. . .

This book was born from the conviction that humor is indefinable and the suspicion that this should not prevent anyone from writing about it. Philosophers have tried. Psychologists too. The results are, invariably, involuntarily funny. The object takes revenge on the method. That, too, is data.

What we propose instead are eleven axioms. Not definitions: contours. Like geometry, which does not define space but allows us to reason about it, the axioms trace the edge of something that cannot be

entirely surrounded. What remains inside is what interests us.

A final warning, which is also Axiom Eleven applied to itself: this book attempts to speak about humor without dissecting it. If we succeed, the reader will notice without being told. If we fail, no axiom will save it. That, too, is humor, viewed from the right angle and with sufficient time.

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Chapter I

Humor is effective or it is not.

The first indication is physical.

It produces laughter or it does not. It produces a smile or it does not. It is funny or it is not. Before any analysis, before any theory, there is a bodily fact that admits no negotiation. The room laughs or it does not. The reader smiles or does not. This occurs or it does not. Everything else comes after.

This may seem like a simplification. It is not. It is the most severe of the humor axioms because it leaves no room for excuses. A text that does not produce the effect it seeks is not defective humor: it is something else. It may be a good intention. It may be visible effort. It may be intelligent, well constructed, technically impeccable. If it does not work, it is not humor. The name of that something else does not much matter. What matters is that we not confuse the categories.

One day, as a child, in the company of my brothers, I said a word with the intonation of someone who has just found something. The first time it produced laughter. The second, less. The third, nothing. What had occurred between the first and the third was not that my brothers had changed mood, nor that I had mispronounced the word. It was that the efficacy had been exhausted. The event cannot be repeated indefinitely. Humor is not a permanent property of the object: it is something that occurs between the object and its recipient, at a specific moment, under conditions that cannot be exactly reconstituted.

The frustration that exhaustion produces is particular. It is not the failure of having attempted something and not achieving it: it is worse. It is the failure of having achieved something and watching it

wear out in real time. Whoever has felt that knows what is being described. Whoever has not has probably never tried to make anyone laugh more than once with the same material.

This raises a question that seems simple and is not: does efficacy depend on the producer or the receiver?

Borges was a profoundly hedonistic reader. If reading did not give him pleasure, he did not feel obligated to enjoy it. That position, which some find arrogant, is in fact the most honest one available when facing humor: no one is obligated to find funny what does not seem funny to them. Midachi has thousands of followers and produces genuine laughter in full rooms. It produces no humor for me. I am not wrong. Neither are they. Efficacy is not universal: it depends on who is in the room.

But there is a trap in this reasoning worth identifying before it becomes comfortable: subjectivity is not an unlimited refuge. In physical terms, efficacy is less subjective than it appears. A room of five hundred people not laughing is a fact. A room of five hundred people laughing is also a fact. What varies is who is in the room and what they expect to find. Humor that works for everyone in any circumstance does not exist. But humor that works for no one in any circumstance is not humor: it is something else that has not yet found its room.

Les Luthiers have a loyal and numerous audience who considers them brilliant. There are people who do not understand them, who are left outside the joke, who feel they are being explained something in a language they know but do not speak. This does not invalidate Les Luthiers nor those who do not understand them. It means that humor operates on frequencies and not all frequencies reach all receivers.

There is a border, however, that merits special attention. There exists low-intensity humor: the text that does not explode, that produces

neither laughter nor broad smile, but does something more subtle. The wit lies in the irony, in the recognition, in something perceived more than felt. Borges operates at that frequency with mastery. It is not that his humor fails: it is that its efficacy is of another temperature. Recognizing that temperature as legitimate is part of understanding that efficacy is not measured only in decibels.

What has no temperature, what produces no effect in any receiver under any circumstance—that is the failure this axiom describes. And it usually has an identifiable cause: it lacks intelligence. Not in the pejorative sense but in the technical one. The text that attempts to be funny and is not almost always lacks the precision necessary for an incorrect placement to produce the desired effect. It is off by a centimeter. Or short by one. In humor, that centimeter is everything.

Humor is effective or it is not. There is no failed humor. There is something else.

Chapter II

Humor does not explain. It performs.

This axiom has a trap. It is worth identifying before someone uses it to refute it.

There is a known, old, and effective device that consists of explaining the joke. Not as accident or failure: as deliberate method. Daniel Rabinovich, in the celebrated introductory monologue of Les Luthiers performances, attempts to introduce a piece with all the academic seriousness in the world. He has a folder, has notes, has vocabulary. What he does not have is control over language, which rebels in real time, producing slips, equivocations, and collapses that no script could have planned with such precision. At a certain moment, confused, overwhelmed, cornered by his own syntax, Rabinovich begins to explain the joke. And that, precisely that, is what generates the humor.

Is this not an exception to the axiom?

No. It is its most elegant confirmation.

What occurs in that monologue is not that the explanation saves the joke. It is that the explanation becomes the joke. Rabinovich is not explaining humor: he is demonstrating, in real time, the impossibility of explaining it. The object takes revenge on the method before the audience. There is no explanation: there is performance. The axiom is not violated. It is practiced from the other side.

The same device appears in another format: the joke one knows will not be very funny, offered with the appropriate tone and then deliberately explained. The humor was not in the original joke. It was in the awareness of its insufficiency, in the gesture of offering it anyway, in the explanation that functions as a signal that the speaker

knows exactly what they are doing. It is second-degree humor: we laugh not at the joke but at the relationship between the teller and the joke being told.

Carlos Núñez Cortés, in those same Les Luthiers shows, permanently employed this device. He interrupted, clarified, pointed out what had just occurred. Over time, the device became predictable. And when a device becomes predictable it stops performing: it starts explaining. That is the moment when the axiom reasserts its full force.

The difference between demonstrating and explaining in humor is the same as between playing a note and talking about it. Explaining says: this is funny, here is the mechanism, this is the intended effect. Demonstrating produces the effect without naming it. The reader or spectator arrives alone. The path is not indicated: the destination is placed before them and they discover, upon arrival, that they were already there.

Chaplin eats a shoe with the concentration and protocol of someone at the finest restaurant in the world. Nobody explains to the audience that it is funny. The camera shows. The audience arrives. What remains belongs to whoever saw it.

Humor does not explain. It performs. What needs to be explained is no longer humor: it is the description of a humor that did not occur.

Chapter III

The joke is to humor what the part is to the whole.

Before demonstrating this axiom it is worth pausing on the lesser object: the joke. Not to define it with precision, an enterprise doomed from the start, but to distinguish it from what it is not.

A joke is a closed unit. It has setup, development, and punchline. The punchline produces the effect or it does not. It is self-sufficient in its structure and dispensable in its context. The joke needs no prior history and no subsequent consequences. It is an isolated event.

Humor is not that.

In *Bicentennial Man*, Robin Williams plays Andrew Martin, a domestic robot attempting to understand the human condition. In one scene, Martin has learned jokes from his employer. He has memorized them with precision. What he has not been able to memorize is the intonation, the context, the relationship between speaker and listener. While serving at a family dinner, he begins reciting jokes. One after another. Without pause. Without inflection. Without the slightest variation in register.

The scene is extraordinary for what it demonstrates: the jokes, taken individually, are not funny. But Martin recites them like someone reading a shopping list. And yet the scene is profoundly humorous. The humor is not in the jokes: it is in the distance between what Martin thinks he is doing and what he is actually doing.

Martin does not understand the jokes. He knows them by heart. That distinction is the humor.

What makes several jokes together become more than the sum of their parts is not accumulation but the construction of a universe. A

universe has characters with their own logic, tensions that sustain themselves over time, a narrative voice that exists beyond each individual unit. When that universe is well constructed, humor can dispense with the joke entirely.

In *Perdónala*, one of Les Luthiers' boleros, the first stanza presents a narrator who declares his love with the solemnity of the genre. Nothing funny yet. The second stanza refutes the first: the same narrator, with the same tone, says exactly the opposite. There is no joke. There is a character whose internal incoherence is total and absolutely coherent with his own logic.

Written humor is more demanding than performed or physical humor. Physical humor is more or less immediate: the body in the wrong space produces the effect before the brain finishes processing. Written humor requires the reader to build the universe while reading, to sustain the tension in working memory, to arrive at the punchline with all context active.

The joke is the part. Necessary sometimes, dispensable at others, always insufficient on its own. The whole is the universe that contains it, the character that inhabits it, the voice that carries it. That is the difference between a list of jokes and a text that makes one laugh.

Chapter IV

Humor is placing something where it does not belong.

Chaplin eats a shoe. He does so at the table, with cutlery, with the concentration of someone before the finest dish of the evening. The laces as noodles. The sole as steak. There is no joke. There is a shoe in the place of food. The universe has reduced him to this and he ignores it, or he knows it and has decided not to yield. In either case, the shoe is where it does not belong. And that is all it needs.

The clown's flower that shoots water. A rude noise emitted among the boys on the corner is nothing but vulgarity. The same noise at a gathering of notaries can be glorious. The noise did not change. The place where it was put changed.

The mechanism seems simple. It is not. The difference between placing something where it does not belong with surgical precision and doing so without it is the difference between humor and mere discomfort. There are turnstiles in every bus in Brazil that produce genuine, daily frustration, with no humor whatsoever. The same turnstile, narrated by the right voice and with the right universe built around it, becomes a humorous event.

What is missing when incorrect placement produces discomfort without producing humor are two things that always go together: the precision of the placement and the complicity of the audience. Without that suspension of disbelief, the shoe on the table is simply a shoe on the table. With it, it is one of the funniest scenes in the history of cinema.

The absurd is an extreme form of this axiom but is not only that. The absurd also plays with chronology, with exaggeration, with enumeration. Enumeration works when each element adds a layer of

incorrect placement over the previous one. When each element is predictable, the enumeration becomes a list.

In *Usted es un hijo de puta*, the diagnostic team includes specialists in statistics, psychology, and numismatics. Numismatics. The word has absolutely nothing to do with the context of the other two. It is there because it does not belong. The reader arrives at that word and something shifts. That is enough.

Seriousness is fundamental. Humor that signals its own mechanism loses half its potency. Chaplin does not wink at the camera. He eats the shoe and that is that.

Humor is placing something where it does not belong. The precision of the placement is everything. One centimeter too many and it is discomfort. One centimeter short and nothing happened. In exactly the right place, it is humor.

Chapter V

Humor that needs to be explained is no longer humor.

This axiom is absolute. But it has a terminological trap worth disarming: the difference between needing explanation and needing context.

They are not the same.

Explanation operates after the fact. It arrives when humor has already occurred, or should have occurred, and produced no effect. When that is necessary, the humor did not fail in the recipient: it failed in the construction.

Context operates before. It is the shared frame of reference between whoever produces the humor and whoever receives it. It is not a crutch: it is the ground on which humor stands.

Chaplin eats the shoe. It requires no explanation in any culture. That context is so universal it is not even perceived as context: it is simply reality. That is why visual and physical humor travels without a passport. Giants among dwarfs, dwarfs among giants: these tensions are legible at any latitude.

Verbal humor is more demanding. The humor of Vic and Bob, a British comedy duo built on vulgar names and fashionable references from 1990s England, is untranslatable not because their jokes are inaccessible but because the ground they stand on does not exist outside that specific cultural context. They need no explanation: they need a recipient who shares that ground.

Humor that improves on a second reading did not need explanation: it needed the recipient to arrive with more information. That information is provided by the text itself. If well constructed, the

reader who rereads the beginning does not receive an explanation: they receive confirmation of something that was there from the start.

The axiom is absolute: humor that needs to be explained is no longer humor. What context adds is not explanation but ground. Gulliver among the Lilliputians needs only that the reader has at some point had the experience of being too large or too small for the place they are in. That experience is universal. The humor that rests on it is too.

Chapter VI

Humor is intellectual surprise.

There is a phrase that anyone has heard and probably said: I didn't understand it. And its variant, almost always pronounced with a certain pride: the second time I saw it, I understood it.

There is a humorous variant: —Did you see that film? —Yes, I saw it twice. The first time I didn't understand it. The joke inverts the expected logic: here the first understanding disappears in the second, as if comprehension were a transitory condition that cures itself. The premise sounds like a clinical condition. That is precisely what makes it funny.

The serious version is absurd for a different reason. If you did not understand it the first time, the surprise no longer exists in the second. What you experienced the second time was not intellectual surprise: it was comprehension. They are different experiences that produce different effects.

Intellectual surprise is not always conscious. The mind is accustomed to receiving a certain type of information in certain contexts, and when that information does not arrive or arrives distorted, something activates before reasoning has time to process.

In *La Divina Burocracia* there is a chapter titled Embassy of the Celestial and White Homeland. For an Argentine raised in public schools, who recited every day the phrase about the celestial and white flag of the homeland, the title produces an immediate recognition that precedes analysis. The humor occurs before it can be explained why it occurs.

There is humor that works by accumulation and rhythm, without any individual moment being the surprise. The scene of Robin Williams

reciting jokes without intonation in Bicentennial Man is an example: no particular joke produces the effect. The accumulation does. There is no punctual punchline. There is a threshold crossed.

An example arose during the writing of this book. While writing the phrase we would have to be grateful to Turing, a typo produced a word that does not exist: Turíamos, a fusion in Spanish of Turing and tendríamos (would have). What the eye first does upon encountering it is read the familiar word. Then there is a discomfort, a resistance, something that forces a second look. And in the second reading, Turing appears inside the word: the reference and the debt, the origin and the gratitude, fused without anyone planning it.

Turíamos is not necessarily humorous. It is ingenious. The distinction matters. Intellectual surprise is the raw material of both humor and ingenuity. Humor requires something more. Intellectual surprise is a necessary but not sufficient condition.

Without it, humor is mechanical. It is missing the spark. It is missing the moment when something that should not fit does fit, and that fitting produces in the recipient an experience that is simultaneously intellectual and visceral.

That experience cannot be manufactured. One can create the conditions for it to occur. Everything else is technique. Necessary, insufficient.

Chapter VII

Humor is tragedy plus time.

Three people. A camping trip. River water they had been drinking every day but which the previous night had turned green with algae. A fulminant amoebic infection that waited, with the particular patience of digestive catastrophes, for the most inopportune possible moment: five hundred meters from the town, with three kilometers of road ahead and no alternative available.

Two of the three did not make it. The third arrived and fought over the bathroom.

In the moment it was clearly tragic. Very shortly after it became a comic event, almost sporting. The axiom worked with laboratory precision: same facts, different temporal distance, opposite result.

Not every tragedy becomes funny with time. The difference between those that do and those that do not has less to do with the magnitude of the damage than with something harder to name: the barrier is individual, and that individuality responds to where the pain is still alive.

There are cancer support groups where specific jokes about the illness circulate, humor that can only be produced and received from within. What from the outside would be cruelty, from the inside is a way of coping with despair. Black humor is not the absence of respect toward tragedy: it is its exact inverse.

Beckett knew this. Nothing is more funny than unhappiness, he wrote, and he did not write it as a paradox but as a technical observation. The humor does not relieve tragedy in Beckett: it makes it more bearable so that it lasts longer. It is an instrument of cruelty, not its antidote.

Cervantes wrote Don Quixote while in prison and destitute. The book is the portrait of a man whose central tragedy is that the world does not function as he believes it does. The distance between the reality Don Quixote perceives and the reality that exists is the source of all the comedy in the book, and also of all its melancholy. What was in the moment humiliation and failure became, through work and time, the funniest and saddest book in the Spanish language. Both things simultaneously, without one canceling the other.

Black humor is this axiom taken to the extreme, but with an additional component: it does not wait for time. It takes the tragedy at the moment it occurs and displaces it toward laughter by force, without the benefit of distance.

The joke about death dislocates our sense of continuity. For a moment, the causal order that tells us everything ends is suspended. The laughter such a joke produces is also an act of minor rebellion, perfectly futile and completely necessary.

The axiom does not promise that every tragedy will become funny. It promises that time is the only variable that can make that conversion possible. And that when it occurs, the humor it produces has a particular density: that of something that survived itself.

Chapter VIII

Humor ages when it depends on reference. It does not age when it depends on tension.

Political humor ages almost without exception. Nobody laughs at a Nixon joke. What survives of that humor is not the humor: it is the cultural and historical reference. The mechanism that produced the laughter no longer functions because the object of the joke no longer occupies the place it occupied.

Physical humor lasts longer. The films of the thirties that still produce something do so in their action sequences, their bodies in the wrong space. What does not survive is humor that depended on dialogue, on the verbal registers of the era. The subversion does not work when the convention no longer exists. Buster Keaton's body falling is still funny because bodies still fall the same way.

Aristophanes is a particular case. His comedies are not funny in the immediate sense: the political jokes he made about Cleon or Socrates require an apparatus of footnotes that destroys any possibility of direct humorous efficacy. Nevertheless the material remains extraordinarily rich. What survived is not the humor but the arguments. Shakespeare recognized and used them.

Polti catalogued thirty-six dramatic situations. Borges cited Kipling, who reduced them to six or seven. The exact number does not matter: the possible arguments are finite and that finitude has not prevented humor from continuing to exist. What changes is not the underlying tension but the form in which it is dressed.

Gulliver among the Lilliputians requires no updating. The tension between the giant and the dwarf is as ancient as the difference in size between people. Swift used it for political satire of his era, and that

satire aged. But the image did not: a man tied down by miniature ropes, immobilized by the sum of many small things. Any body that has felt that form of immobilization recognizes it immediately.

The distinction this axiom proposes is between humor that depends on the recipient sharing a specific map and humor that depends on tensions all bodies know. The first is more precise, more effective in its moment, more impossible to transport. The second is slower, less explosive, more porous. Both are humor. But only one of the two has any chance of still being here in a hundred years.

Chapter IX

Laughter does not measure humor. Sometimes it accompanies it.

There are people with an easy laugh and an even easier smile. For them this axiom requires an additional effort of observation. But the axiom does not say that laughter is absent. It says it does not measure. The presence of laughter does not certify humor. The absence of laughter does not negate it.

Stupidity frequently produces laughter. It is not humor. It is the bitter laughter that novelists know well, the kind that arises when reality surpasses any deliberate construction. That laughter has no pleasure in it. It is a response of overflow, not of recognition.

Irony operates on another frequency. It produces more of a smile than a burst of laughter, more an internal recognition than a broad physical response. The pleasure it produces is mental before physical. It is savored more than celebrated.

There is a hierarchy, but not in the sense the word usually carries. Laughter responds to something that hits quickly and hard. The smile responds to something more sustained, more constructed. Silent recognition responds to something operating at the threshold of perception, barely noticed, yet producing a particular satisfaction: that of having found something that was not announced.

Kafka is profoundly funny. He does not produce laughter in most readers. He produces something more like uncomfortable recognition, the smile that appears just before the anguish arrives. The laughter he produces, when he produces any, is the most honest available: that of someone who has just understood something they would have preferred not to.

The Name of the Rose builds an entire plot around laughter as a

dangerous object. If people can laugh at death, death loses part of its power to control. That the plot revolves around a lost book on comedy is the affirmation that humor is as powerful as anything that merits being destroyed.

Laughter, the smile, silent recognition. Three ways of saying something worked. None more valid than the others. What does not exist is humor that produces none of the three.

Chapter X

Humor functions as a corrective.

The court jester had real power. Not symbolic power, not decorative power: low-intensity power but real power, with real consequences for what could be said at court. The jester's license was not a gracious concession from the king: it was a pressure valve the system needed to avoid explosion.

In Argentina, starting in 1978, the magazine *Humor* became a cultural refuge in the most literal sense of the word. The critical voice was slippery: it could make power uncomfortable and power could pretend it was not being addressed, because admitting it was being addressed meant admitting it had been understood, and understanding it was already a form of legitimizing it.

During World War II humor functioned as propaganda in the United States with an efficacy that formal speeches could not match. In both cases the mechanism is the same: humor says what the serious register cannot say, or says it in a way that reaches where the serious register does not. The guard comes down. The recipient laughs before thinking.

Humor as corrective does not require that its object know about it. The joke circulating about the dictator does not need the dictator to hear it to undermine his authority: it needs to be heard by those who fear him. A power that can be ridiculed is a power that can be questioned. A power that can be questioned is a power that can fall.

Totalitarianisms fear humor because they fear difference. That is also why they attack poetry: both escape their sphere of understanding, both operate on frequencies that authoritarian thinking cannot tune in to. That space is ungovernable. And the ungovernable is always

dangerous for whoever needs to govern everything.

Satire is something else, though it is related. Satire is more explicit: it has an identifiable target, a declared intention. Humor as corrective can operate without visible target, building an atmosphere in which certain things become ridiculous without anyone having formally indicated that they should be. That form of corrective is slower and more durable. It does not topple anything in a single blow. It makes what should collapse seem, over time, impossible to sustain.

Chapter XI

Every attempt to define humor falls into its own trap.

This book does not attempt to define humor. It starts from the premise that humor is not definable, in the same way that loyalty, love, and poetry are not definable. It can be circled. It can be pointed at with examples. One can propose a series of axioms that are approximations, not certainties, easily revisable by anyone with better examples or better arguments. But the concept will always be halfway there. No matter how close you get.

Freud attempted to define humor. His jokes, translated from German, are frankly poor. So poor they produce an almost contemptuous laugh, if they produce any at all. Bergson attempted it too. Pontificating always has something ridiculous about it. The object took revenge on the method. That their analyses continue to be cited does not mean they achieved what they intended: it means the attempt itself is instructive.

This axiom does not invalidate the ten preceding ones. It completes them. If humor were definable, this axiom would be superfluous. Since it is not, this axiom is the only one that cannot be missing.